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SUBJECT: BULGARIA: GOVERNMENT PLAN FOR ELECTION LOTTERY  
STIRS DOMESTIC CONTROVERSY

Ref: (A) SOFIA 1020, (B) SOFIA 1036

1. (SBU) SUMMARY: A government plan to use a lottery to boost voter turnout in the June 25 election has stirred controversy in Bulgaria, drawing criticism towards PM Simeon Saxe-Coburg's ruling party during the election campaign. The state-funded lottery - giving out prizes to those who vote - is unique for Bulgaria and the EU. Ruling party officials have told us it is a key part of their plan to boost voter turnout in order to prevent the poll-leading Socialists from winning an absolute majority. Both leftist and center-right opposition groups accused the ruling National Movement for Simeon II (NMSS) of scheming to buy votes, and attacked the government plan in court. The provocative TV clips promoting the campaign added to the controversy as they were largely perceived as politically incorrect. The government is determined to go ahead with the plan. END SUMMARY

2. (U) The government plans to award 800,000 leva (\$502,510) worth of prizes -- including one car, cell phones, and computers -- to people who vote. The remainder of the 4.0 million (\$2.5 million) in state election funds allocated for the plan will be used for an advertising campaign to get out the vote. Those who wish to participate will have to send a text message via mobile phone, register on the Internet, or phone a landline number, submitting their personal identification number and the number of the voting station. The lottery will take place after the end of the vote in all 31 electoral regions. Government spokesman Dimitar Tsonev said the lottery was a legitimate method of raising voter turnout, used in the U.S., and Britain, although there it had been organized by non-governmental organizations.

#### LOTTERY PLAN SPARKS POLITICAL ROW

3. (U) Both leftist and center-right opposition groups slammed the government idea, saying the NMSS was scheming to buy votes and using taxpayers' money to raise voter turnout - which will fit its own political goals. Under Bulgaria's complex proportional representation system, the ex-king's party, which relies predominantly on a soft vote, will benefit from higher turnout while the BSP has a strong core electorate and will gain more MP seats in case of a lower turnout (Ref. A, B). The Socialists and two center-right groups -- the Union of Democratic Forces and the party of former PM Ivan Kostov -- challenged the government plan before the Supreme Administrative Court, which has yet to rule on the issue. They say the lottery is illegal, as under electoral law only the Central Electoral Commission (CEC) can organize state-funded campaigns to boost turnout. The CEC also scolded the government for failing to clear the campaign with the Commission and withholding details about its funding. The government did not seek through competitive bidding a company to manage the lottery advertising campaign, but instead directly hired the company currently advising the NMSS election campaign. The Socialists requested an emergency session of parliament. The speaker of parliament, a ruling party member, refused to call the session, which only escalated the political row.

4. (SBU) Senior NMSS officials publicly defended the plan, but said the party had nothing to do with it as it was a project initiated and handled by the government. However, ruling party officials, including campaign chief Lidia Shuleva, have told us the government campaign to boost turnout was an important part of the party's strategy to prevent the Socialists from winning an absolute majority. The initial idea for the lottery came from a production company hired for the NMSS' election. The company is known for producing the Bulgarian versions of "The Big Brother" and "Who Wants to be a Millionaire" but has no previous experience in political campaigning. Its chief told us recently he had not expected the issue to trigger such a political row.

#### RULING PARTY GETS NEGATIVE PUBLICITY

5. (U) The provocative TV clips promoting the election lottery added to the controversy as they came under attack by the public and NGOs for political incorrectness. One clip perpetuates a negative stereotype of Bulgaria's Roma

population while another features obscene language. The clips, which the producers say had been green-lighted personally by Simeon, had to be remade, deleting the controversial parts. The lottery controversy drew predominantly negative press coverage. "The People against the Election Lotto" read a front-page headline in Standart newspaper, which ran a poll showing that 70 percent of Bulgarians were against the lottery. Some sociologists hailed the idea, saying only something innovative and provocative could bring the apathetic youth to the polls.

The majority, however, said voters should be motivated through political and ideological means rather than material incentives. The Socialists jumped at the opportunity to exploit the controversy, airing a TV cartoon ridiculing the lottery plan.

16. COMMENT: The controversy surrounding the election lottery has hijacked media attention during the first week of the election campaign, overshadowed NMSS' leaders campaign activities and drawn predominantly negative coverage. Although it is not yet clear what the final outcome of the plan will be, so far it has not helped the NMSS narrow its gap with the Socialists. Instead, it has put the ex-king's party in the center of a political and legal row that draws negative publicity and subjects it to attacks by the opposition. END COMMENT